

Sermon Pentecost 25: “What is it that really matters?”

1 Sam 1: 4-20	Song of Hannah pg 429	Heb 10: 11-14, 19-25	Mark 13: 1-11
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I wonder if any of you knew the Rev’d Gary Priest, who died recently?

Gary was ordained a deacon in 1970 and a priest in 1972 and he and Robyn served in the Dioceses of Riverina, Bunbury and Grafton, retiring to Adelaide in 2009. Here, Gary did *locums* at Salisbury, Semaphore, South Road, Plympton, Parkside and Port Adelaide. Gary’s love for Jesus was luminous and infectious and he could talk to anyone, including making friends with the workers in the massage parlours and adult entertainment shops up and down South Rd.

I remind myself regularly that I too am going to die, as a way of trying to focus on core essentials, to reflect on “What really matters?”

Thinking this week about Gary and the lessons set for this penultimate Sunday of Pentecost, it occurred to me that both OT and Gospel contain elements of an answer to that question: “What really matters?”.

In the OT lesson, which would not be out of place in the script for a low-budget TV soap opera, we meet Hannah, probably the first wife of a man whom Scripture specifically notes, loves her: Elkanah. This is significant because the only other time in the Old Testament where a man is said to love his wife is in Genesis 29:18 where it says, “Jacob loved Rachel.” Hannah is in rare company.

Perhaps the reason Elkanah has two wives is precisely because “Hannah had no children (v 2).” In that day, family farms depended on the labour of the extended family, including children, who were also the source of your security into old age. Passing on your family name to future generations was also important, so **not** having children was a huge problem. Perhaps Elkanah took a second wife in Peninnah in order to secure his legacy and safeguard his lineage.

Hannah means “gracious” or “favoured.” Hannah certainly is Elkanah’s favourite, and he demonstrates that every year when the family go to Shiloh to worship and feast. Elkanah gives his beloved Hannah two servings of the food to remind her how special she is to him.

However, it is not enough, and it is clear that Elkanah is **not** more to his beloved wife than 10 sons. He cannot fill the hole in Hannah's heart that only a child and motherhood can fill.

So we see her, misunderstood by her husband, and now by Eli the temple priest. We watch her pouring out her intense distress in soundless prayer, only to be accused of being drunk: "No my Lord, I am a woman deeply troubled ... I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord... for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time."

Notice that Eli does not seem to apologise for his offensive assumption but does offer something of a blessing: "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." And as we know, that is exactly what happens in the conception and subsequent birth of Samuel.

So what could possibly be a parallel in the Gospel?

We can only really understand Mark 13 in its broader context Chapters 11-14 take us from the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem (11:1-11) through a series of running battles between Jesus and the religious authorities (11-12) to Jesus' betrayal (14:43-51) and Peter's denial (14:66-72), the crucifixion (chapters 14-15) and the resurrection (chapter 16).

Chapters 11 and 12 are filled with Jesus' criticisms of Israel's religious establishment and he speaks clearly enough for the religious leaders to want to kill him. However, they are afraid to act on this because of the crowd (12:12).

Chapter 13 continues this apocalyptic Jesus, *apocalyptic* meaning "unveiling" or "revealing" as Jesus continues to criticise the status quo by disclosing signs of its end, predicting the destruction of the temple, the centre of religious life. He is ambiguous, however, about the timing of events and so when they are on the Mount of Olives, we hear Peter, James, John, and Andrew ask him privately to explain. It is interesting to notice that, in this Gospel, when Jesus is on a mountain, he is either alone or with his disciples (3:13; 6:46; 9:2-9; 11:1; 14:26). He seems to meet with crowds on the plains or at the seaside.

Private conversations are a mark of this Gospel. Throughout Mark, Jesus reserves some of his most essential teaching for private moments with the disciples. For example, he explains the parables to them privately (4:34; cf. 4:10-12).

He takes Peter, James, and John alone to a high mountain and reveals his transfigured self to them (9:2-8). You may recall that it was in private that the disciples asked Jesus why they could not cast out a demon in a specific case (9:28).

So what is the point?

In answering I want to circle back to where I began: The fact I am going to die, a truth of which I remind myself often so as to focus on what really matters: Relationship. That is what is depicted in the OT and Gospel accounts today. We watch and overhear people for whom relationship with God matters; we witness them engaging with their God.

When we each, as Father Gary [as he liked to be known] has done, when we reach the end of our lives, that is all that will be left, God and us; God and me; God and you.

While we are still on the way there, we can forget in all the busyness and noise of life that this is all there will be; *all there really is*; what **really** matters, to use the phrase with which I began is just that: You and God.

So, my question for each of us today is: “What will help you grow in relationship with God?”

PC has introduced new initiatives like the Book Club and quiet mornings precisely because in the 2019 CLS responses, people said that they wanted a greater focus on spiritual growth, they wanted to grow in relationship with God.

What else can we do?

What will help you grow in relationship with God?

“What really matters?”

References

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